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OF THE

# LIFE, CHARACTER, AND METHOD

OF

# REV. JOSEPH NIMMO,

BY HIS SON

JOSEPH NIMMO, JR.

WASHINGTON, D. C.
GIBSON BROTHERS, PRINTERS.
1884.

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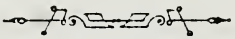
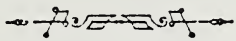


*To my sister*, MARGARET JANE NIMMO, *and my brothers*, WILLIAM HENRY DICKSON NIMMO *and* GERSHOM HATTON NIMMO, *this brief sketch of the life, character, and method of our beloved Father is affectionately inscribed.*

JOSEPH NIMMO, Jr.

WASHINGTON, D. C.,
*August 12th, 1884.*



Mahopac Falls, N. Y., *Aug.* 7, 1884.

Mr. Joseph Nimmo, Jr.,

*Washington, D. C.*

Dear Sir: We are about celebrating our centennial, and are anxious to secure information regarding your father, a pastor here when this place was called "Red Mills." Can you help us? We would like to know of his life, work, character, and method.

Hoping for an early reply, I remain

Yours truly,

HARRIS R. SCHENCK,

*Pastor Presbyterian Church.*

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Washington, D. C., *Aug.* 11*th*, 1884.

Rev. Harris R. Schenck.

*Pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Mahopac Falls:*

My Dear Sir: I have to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 7th inst., and, in compliance with your request, enclose to you herewith such sketch of my father's "life, work, character, and method" as I have been able to prepare amid the pressure of somewhat engrossing duties. It has been my intention for many years to write a memoir of my father, but the pressure of business has caused the cherished purpose to be postponed from year to year. Besides, I have always felt an indefinable aversion to sitting down to the task of speaking of him as a man, coolly attempting to analyze his character, and to state his comparative merits, while my feeling towards him is always one of tender affection and of deep reverence. The whole tendency of my thoughts is to regard him only in the endearing relation of father.

He did not attain to a high degree of success according to earthly standards, for he was of "the children of light," and not of "the children of this world;" but take him for all in all, his undoubtedly respectable talents; his scholarly and refined tastes; his sweet, lovable disposition; his patience, prudence, sound judgment, high moral courage, perfect integrity, generosity, love and sympathy toward his fellow-men, never failing charity and refined courtesy, faith in God and his promises, and devotion to the divine mission to which he was called—regarding all these qualities, he was, I sincerely believe, the best man I ever knew.

Wishing you a pleasant and profitable centennial and great success in your work,

I am, my dear sir, very truly yours,

JOSEPH NIMMO, Jr.

# BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

Rev. Joseph Nimmo, pastor of the Presbyterian church at Red Mills, New York, from 1836 to 1840, was born in Princess Anne County, Virginia, near Norfolk, about the year 1797. When only about six months old his father died, and at the age of six years he lost his mother. In consequence of these events the record of his birth was lost, and he never knew his exact age. His early life was passed at the home of an uncle, who was his legal guardian. When a mere lad he was placed in the store of a friend in Norfolk as clerk, with the view of preparing him for commercial life, but at the age of fourteen he had connected himself with the Presbyterian church of Norfolk, and appears soon afterwards to have formed the determination to devote himself to the work of the Christian ministry. His income from his patrimony, principally slaves, was sufficient to meet his needs for support during his academic, collegiate, and professional course.

While employed as clerk in Norfolk, that city was beleagured by the British fleet, which, during the war of 1812, dominated Chesapeake Bay. Young Nimmo, although only about seventeen years of age, volunteered in the service of his country. At first he was refused on account of his youth and smallness of stature, but upon persistent entreaty he was allowed to shoulder his mus-

ket and march with a hastily-formed company of recruits to Craney Island, where one or two ineffectual attempts were made by the enemy to land and storm the defensive work which had been erected by the Americans at that point.

A few years later Mr. Nimmo entered Hampden Sidney College, Virginia. His collegiate course was interrupted by a severe affliction. During his second or third year in college he was attacked with a disorder in his eyes which confined him for months to a darkened room. This occasioned a loss of about one year in his college course. A less resolute or devoted spirit would have succumbed, but he pushed on in the prosecution of his original purpose in life. In the year 1823 he was matriculated as a student of divinity in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary of Princeton, New Jersey. His diploma upon graduation bears date September 25, 1826, and is signed by Archibald Alexander, Samuel Miller, and Charles Hodge, professors—names resplendent in the history of the Presbyterian Church of the United States.

While at Princeton a revival of religion took place in the military academy at West Point. At the request of his friend, Rev. Mr. Bangs, chaplain of that post, a methodist clergyman, formerly of Norfolk, Va., Mr. Nimmo, with two or three other students at Princeton, went to West Point for the purpose of aiding in the work among the cadets. The trip up and down the Hudson was made in a sailing vessel. This was about the year 1825. Leonidas Polk, afterwards Bishop Polk of Mississippi, and subsequently General Polk of the Confederate Army, was among the con-

verts. Between him and Mr. Nimmo there sprung up a warm friendship, which lasted for many years.

While he was at Princeton the great political question of the abolition of slavery began to be agitated. During his boyhood Mr. Nimmo had heard the question debated in Virginia, among the more conscientious and religious slave-holders, as to whether slave-holding should be regarded as an evil, or as a sin. But while at Princeton he became fully persuaded, in his own mind, that, as it existed at the South, it was both an evil and a sin, and this conviction led him to the heroic act of his life, viz., the freeing of his slaves, numbering, as near as can be ascertained, about fifteen. One or two families were sent to Liberia. The rest remained in Virginia. Mr. Nimmo declared that he would never preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to men while holding his fellow-man in bondage. His friends protested earnestly and sharply against the step, for it was the relinquishment of his entire worldly possessions. But he was immovable in his purpose. Upon his return to Norfolk he was offered by a personal friend the sum of one thousand dollars in cash for one of his men, which offer he declined. Several years afterwards, when a slave insurrection broke out in the counties adjoining Norfolk, a law was passed expelling free Negroes from the State upon penalty of their being sold into slavery. Thereupon the man above alluded to, with others, destroyed their manumission papers, and claimed to be again the slaves of Mr. Nimmo. After awhile the excitement abated and again he set them free by papers avoiding the provision of the statutes. An incident may be related which serves to illustrate his abhor-

rence of slavery. About ten years after he had manumitted his slaves he visited Virginia with his family. The vessel landed at Norfolk. His wife and children crossed over to Portsmouth by the ferry in advance, while he remained to look after baggage. Unfortunately, as he crossed over he saw at the ferry landing a stalwart Negro, lacerated and covered with blood, from what must have been an unusually severe castigation, for the offence of having secreted himself on shipboard with the purpose of escaping to the land of freedom. When he joined his family he related the incident, and with an expression of horror upon his face exclaimed, "I want to get back to the North as soon as possible."

Soon after the completion of his course in divinity at Princeton, the young licentiate received a call from the Presbyterian church at Portsmouth, Va., and he became the first pastor of that church. Here he met Hannah Dickson, to whom he was united in marriage January 22, 1829. His wife's mother, the widow of Captain John Dickson, was a staunch Scotch Presbyterian and one of the pillars of the new church. Mr. Nimmo's first child, a son, was born at Portsmouth. Partly in consequence of ill health, but more on account of his aversion to bringing up a family under the demoralizing influences of slavery, he sought a charge in a northern State, and, during the year 1830, became pastor of a Presbyterian church in the town of Huntington, Long Island, New York. Here there were born to him two sons and a daughter.

In the year 1836 he received a call from the Presbyterian church at Red Mills, Putnam County, New York,

now known as the Church of Mahopac Falls, which call he accepted, and removed with his family to his new field of duty in December of that year. His pastorate at Red Mills, although auspiciously begun, was soon clouded by disaster and dissension. About a year and a half after his removal to that place, July 5th, 1838, while driving out with his wife and daughter and a friend, his horse took fright and ran away. The entire party were thrown to the ground, and Mr. Nimmo received a compound fracture of one of his legs. This kept him from his pulpit for about four months. Soon after his convalescence the theological warfare, as between the old school and the new school party of the Presbyterian Church, became a question of ecclesiastical partisanship in the church at Red Mills. The struggle was marked by the bitterness which has invariably characterized religious struggles, for men are never so serious as when the appeal is to their consciences and to the promptings of their spiritual natures. The new school party assumed the aggressive. On one occasion Mr. Nimmo was compelled, before an audience, sternly to rebuke a leader of the opposition for what he regarded as disorderly conduct, and an attempt to set at defiance the rightful authority of the pastor.

This contest among the Presbyterians appears to have marked the close of a long period of warfare in the Christian Church, and the inauguration of a period of Christian unity amid denominational diversity. But, like the choppy cross-seas which follow the change in the direction of the wind after a protracted storm, it subjected the laboring bark to greater strains than when riding out the gale. The struggle as between "old

school" and "new school" resulted in embitterments which were paralyzing to the spiritual life of the church. Mr. Nimmo was a firm adherent of the old school faith, and manfully resisted the disorganizing attempts of the new school party. But he soon realized that it would be better for him to retire from a field of strife in which, unavoidably, he had been a participant, for the struggle finally degenerated into a social contest which assumed the form of two parties—the one in favor of, and the other opposed to, the pastor. Accordingly, in July, 1840, he removed to and took charge of the church at Somers, only eight miles from Red Mills.

At the same time, he assumed charge of the Presbyterian church at North Salem, N. Y., then a mission enterprise, and, besides, for three or four years he was principal of the academy at Somers. His work was exceedingly arduous, but it was sustained and brightened by friendships and social endearments which made happy his own life and the lives of those of his family. The Somers church was transferred to Croton Falls, two miles distant, in the year 1843, and Mr. Nimmo removed with his family to that place April 3d of that year.

By his personal efforts, mainly, new church edifices were erected both at Croton Falls and at North Salem. The North Salem church was dedicated October 13, 1847, and the Croton Falls church April 16, 1848. But in 1848 his health gave way, and a throat trouble ensued, which for many years disabled him from the work of the ministry. He again sought relief in the stimulus of the ocean air of Long Island, and a few months afterwards, having been measurably restored to health, he purchased a home at Huntington, Long Island, near the

scene of his early ministry, and this remained his place of residence until his death. There, for several years, he conducted an English and classical school, preparing several young men for the ministry. Among this number was one of his own sons. This was one of the chief joys of his life.

About the year 1830 he became a warm adherent and advocate of the total abstinence temperance movement, and he never afterwards used spirituous liquors as a beverage.

When the war of the rebellion broke out, in 1861, Mr. Nimmo was one of the first to utter his voice in favor of the Union. A few days after the surrender of Fort Sumter the patriotic citizens of Huntington assembled in mass meeting to assert their devotion to their country. Mr. Nimmo was one of the foremost speakers. It was his first political speech. He spoke of his love for his native State, Virginia, but declared that his allegiance was due first to his country. He had shouldered his musket and marched under the starry flag in his youth, and he would not turn his back upon it in his old age. His sincere, earnest expression of countenance, his full and beautiful suit of hair, whitened with nearly the allotted age of man, and the influence of his enthusiasm, his fervid eloquence, his pure character, his professional calling, and the knowledge of the sacrifice he had made to freedom when entering upon the Christian ministry, had great effect. On the street and elsewhere, as he had opportunity, he encouraged young men to enlist in the cause of liberty and the Union.

After passing the age of fifty-five Mr. Nimmo enjoyed more comfortable health than at any previous period of

his life. During the years 1859 and 1860 he temporarily had charge of the Presbyterian church at Islip, Long Island, which prospered during the period of his ministry. In the autumn of 1864 he was attacked by an internal malady, the real nature of which was never known. His last hours were brightened by the joyful news of the suppression of the great rebellion and the destruction of the power of slavery in the United States. On the 19th of April, 1865, while the country was plunged in grief and clothed in the habiliments of mourning for the death of Abraham Lincoln, this servant of God, surrounded by his family, undismayed and unclouded as to his mental and spiritual vision, yielded his soul calmly and trustfully to his Maker!

In one respect Mr. Nimmo had an exceptional experience in life, which may here be mentioned. As before stated, both his parents died while he was a mere child. He never had a sister; and his only brother, who was twelve years his senior, survived him several years, dying at the age of ninety-four. His wife and all his children also survived him. He therefore passed through life without ever having experienced the grief which results from the loss of father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or child. His cousin, Mrs. Margaret Nimmo Ellis, of Richmond, Va., whose father was his guardian, was unto him as a sister, the two having lived together for several years under one roof. She also survived him, dying a few years ago at the age of eighty-seven.

The true estimate of the strength and worth of a human character must be gained not alone from acts and experiences, but also from environing conditions; not so

much, perhaps, from what a man has attained unto, as from what he has gone through. Mr. Nimmo sprung from one of the oldest and most highly respectable families of Virginia. The first of his ancestors, bearing the surname of Nimmo, came to this country about the year 1740, and settled at Norfolk. He was from Midlothian, near Edinburgh, Scotland. A brother of this ancestor, who came over at about the same time, settled at Williamsburgh, then the capital of the colony of Virginia. He was a man of considerable wealth, and a member of the famous Ohio Company, composed, in the language of the royal charters of that period, of "merchants and gentlemen." Mr. Nimmo's father was a lawyer, and at the same time a land-holder and slave-owner. On account of his eloquence he was known as "Burke" Nimmo. The early life of the subject of this sketch was passed in a social atmosphere, the marked characteristics of which were family pride and patrician sentiment. The fact that he was left an orphan at the early age of six years, with a competency in slave property, invited to a life of ease and of pleasure. Besides, the influence of his surroundings was opposed to vigorous and manly effort. But he had a heart, a conscience, and an understanding which were the muniments of a character superior to the accidents of life. And when, at the early age of fourteen, he consecrated himself to the service of his God, his personal status in life and his relations to his fellows were determined by a firm belief in the sovereignty of his Maker and the brotherhood of man. His early training and associations gave him the peculiar ease and grace of manners which have always characterized the Southern gentle-

man, and his keen perception, charm of personal manner, and opportunities acquainted him with the best usages of social life. He was always and everywhere at his ease. He was beloved and respected by the rich and the poor, by the high and the low, the religious and irreligious. His personal friendship extended to men of all religious denominations, and among his warmest admirers and adherents were even those who made no pretensions whatever to a religious life. But he was ever true to his convictions and his profession, and his graceful and never-failing dignity of character protected him against any intrusion. At all proper times he was outspoken and manly in his utterances, and yet so modest was he that he never obtruded himself upon any human being—not even upon his own children. His temper was chivalric. He was never false to his convictions, his friendships, his affections, or his sense of duty. He had a nature touched to the finest issues. The world was a little too rough for him. He was heavenly minded. His conscience was the guiding star of his life, and his trust in God was the magnet of his soul. In the memory of those who knew him up to the time of his death he was never known to speak boastfully or in his own praise. The mention of his great act of Christian philanthropy in freeing his slaves never passed his lips. He was considerate, kind, and deferential to all. He was never heard to speak disparagingly or unkindly of any one, nor to express a revengeful thought towards those who had done him injury, of whom happily there were, in all his life, but very few. His manly pride of personal character, his nice sense of propriety, and his

clear perception of duty forbade that he should ever be used, or trifled with. His sympathies went out to the suffering everywhere, and his affections for those he loved were strong and enduring. No man was ever more free of caprice, affectation, or prejudice. He looked habitually upon the better side of human nature, and was always more inclined to excuse than to condemn the erring. He had a bright and exceedingly cheerful disposition, a keen sense and enjoyment of humor, and a remarkably equable temper. He was self-possessed, and always exhibited in his deportment an admirable repose of manner, which commanded and sustained confidence. Mr. Nimmo was about five feet five inches in height, his features were strong and well proportioned, and his countenance clearly expressed the marked traits of his character. His eyes, which were brown and exceedingly beautiful, were his most attractive feature. They retained the lustre of youth to the end.

He was a man of fine scholarly tastes and attainments, and he retained his familiarity with the Latin and Greek classics to the close of his life. His learning sat not loosely upon him, but was an integral part of his personality. He had a critical knowledge of the rules and proprieties of speech. His style as a writer was simple, unaffected, and direct. There was in his sermons no superfluity of rhetorical figures, and he sought always to instruct and to win by direct and earnest appeals to the minds and hearts of his hearers. His chirography was bold and easily legible; and in his work as a student, as in all his personal habits, he was neat, orderly, and methodical.

Mr. Nimmo's method as a preacher was what at this particular period might be called "old fashioned," but what at some future day may again become new fashioned. His sermons were strictly logical discourses, and conformed to the divisional and sub-divisional methods which characterized sermonizing thirty years or more ago. He proved scripture by scripture, and sought to inculcate practical lessons in Christian living from theological truths. Every precept was made to rest upon the bed-rock of doctrine, for he believed that doctrine is the foundation of all firm and substantial Christian principle and practice. He depreciated the practice which, before his death, seemed to be sweeping the pulpit into the more fascinating habit of mere moral and intellectual performances and to appeals to sentiment, rather than to the consciences and the spiritual susceptibilities of mankind. Already the tendency appears to be once more toward the old plan, avoiding, however, some of its more stately and artificial characteristics. Possessed of a broad, catholic spirit, he was always inclined to be hopeful, and to see possible good even in methods diametrically opposed to those which he pursued. He had an abiding faith in the final and complete triumph of the Christian religion, and believed that in God's own good time He would bring it to pass.

His convictions were deep seated and immovable, and his principles were ingrafted into the very fibre of his being. He was one of the few men who, in the language of the Psalmist, could exclaim from the depths of his experience and in all sincerity, "My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed." And he had the moral courage of his religious convictions. When he was approaching

his end, he declared calmly but earnestly that he had no fear of death, for, as he said, "he had made his peace with God when he was only fourteen years of age;" and for the consolement of his sorrowing family, toward whom all his thoughts seemed to be directed, he entreated them not to think of him as in the grave. It is mentioned by Macaulay, in illustration of the exquisite urbanity of Charles II, that when near his end he apologized to his attendents for the trouble he had given them, and "for his unconscionable time in dying." Mr. Nimmo gave a no less remarkable proof, upon his death-bed, of his innate politeness. One of his sons, who had travelled by rail for nearly twenty-four hours in order to see his father once more, was holding his hand and watching the gradual approach of death. Suddenly he looked up, and in a voice scarcely audible—for he was then dying—said, "My son, I am afraid I fatigue you; you are tired."

If he had been less retiring and unobtrusive in his disposition, or had entertained a higher relative estimate of his own abilities, his success in life, from a worldly point of view, would undoubtedly have been more marked, for he was a man of highly respectable talents. Many of his discourses were exceedingly eloquent, and he received from men of learning and of capable judgment the highest commendation. But self-depreciation seemed to be with him a constitutional trait. His ministrations were, however, in every place effectual in the upbuilding of churches; and, besides, the influence of his pure, consistent, and stable character made itself felt for the good of the world wherever he came in contact with men.

When, at last, the summons for his departure came, there passed from the scenes of earth to the mansions of the bless'd, a true patriot, a self-sacrificing philanthropist, a warm and steadfast friend, an affectionate and loving husband and father, and a noble-hearted Christian gentleman.

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